Opinion
NCR Voices

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The Democratic Party autopsies continue. Critically, the Democrats are now tagged as the party of the nation's cultural elite, so the changes need to extend beyond the party's leaders. The soul-searching must be more widespread. It won't be easy.

Today, and over the next few Mondays, I plan to look at some of the deeper habits of thought that have come to characterize Democratic Party leaders and that need to change.

The first deadly habit the left has to forswear is its tendency to heresy-hunt. If you are hunting for converts, you are engaged in party-building. If you are hunting for heretics, you end up alienating people whose votes you need.

This heresy-hunting tendency is found to the nth degree in discussions of sex and gender. It is pretty obvious that transgender-related issues are replacing abortion as the principal totem in our culture wars. While former President Donald Trump barely mentioned abortion during the campaign, the GOP spent millions of dollars on an ad that highlighted old video of Vice President Kamala Harris indicating her support for gender-reassignment surgeries for prison inmates, paid for by the government.

The LGBTQ-rights group GLAAD profiled a report that the ads weren't working.

The Harris campaign chose not to respond to the onslaught of ads.

Oops.

"Democrats spend way too much time trying not to offend anyone rather than being brutally honest about the challenges many Americans face," Democratic Rep. Seth Moulton of Massachusetts told The New York Times. "I have two little girls, I don't want them getting run over on a playing field by a male or formerly male athlete, but as a Democrat I'm supposed to be afraid to say that."

We can debate the issue of trans athletes and high school sports another day. It is the phrase "as a Democrat I'm supposed to be afraid to say that" that identifies the heresy-hunting problem.

Sure enough, liberal elites soon proved Moulton's point. Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey accused Moulton of "playing politics" and added, "It's important in this

moment that we not pick on particularly vulnerable children." The chair of Tufts University's political science department reportedly contacted Moulton's office and said the school would no longer place interns in the congressman's office, although university officials quickly indicated that was not the case. GLAAD highlighted podcaster Jane Coasten's response: "Scapegoating trans people isn't it. Because it's not just untrue, it is morally wrong. It is wrong to cast a group of people to the wolves because you want to pick up more votes with people who actually don't care very much about trans people one way or the other."

Why is it "playing politics" to call attention to moral qualms a lot of parents have about transgender athletes? Aren't all children vulnerable? Why is voicing the concern Moulton raised the equivalent of throwing people to the wolves? Did he say, "and let's be mean and vicious to trans kids"? No, no, no. The response to his comments reveals the face of heresy-hunting.

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The bias extends beyond political elites. Here at the National Catholic Reporter, we follow Associated Press style. Its guidelines for language state, in part: "If surgery is involved, *gender-affirming* or *gender-affirmation surgery*. Do not use the outdated term *sex change*, and avoid describing someone as *pre-op* or *post-op*." Whether biological sex is more important than socially constructed gender is the heart of the cultural debate. If journalism aims at objectivity, why does AP style pick a winner? How is this different from what Fox News does?

Alas, the people who set AP standards are part of the cultural elite. They have read, or been influenced by people who have read, Judith Butler, whose seminal work is at the root of much gender ideology. Most Americans, myself included, think Butler's gender ideology is bonkers.

Heresy-hunting exists on other issues too. At the Nation, Kareem Elrafai accused New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of "betrayal" after the progressive congresswoman's speech to the Democratic National Convention. Her sin? She had praised the party's nominee for "working tirelessly to secure a ceasefire in Gaza and bring the hostages home."

Elrafai argued the Biden-Harris administration had not done enough to end the war between Israel and Hamas, but he aimed his venom at Ocasio-Cortez: "It would have been galling to see anyone engage in this fiction. But to see Ocasio-Cortez — a movement politician and a self-described democratic socialist — do so was a genuine blow. Worse: It was an outright betrayal."

I do not believe the majority of Americans are anti-trans bigots, or that they are unmoved by the suffering of the people in Gaza. It is possible to be concerned that divorcing gender from biological sex holds potential dangers, and also take steps to accommodate the needs of those for whom the male-female binary does not correspond to their experience or feelings. It is possible to want the war in Gaza to stop without placing all the blame for civilian casualties on Israel.

Republicans' hyperventilating about which bathroom can be used by Delaware's incoming congresswoman, Sarah McBride, who is transgender, will backfire if they appear mean-spirited. I shudder to think what Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will do once Washington is no longer counseling restraint.

Nonetheless, it is the GOP that won the trifecta. It controls the White House and both houses of Congress.

It is the Democrats who need to reimagine a way back into political relevance and power. They won't get there by demanding an Ivy League orthodoxy on cultural issues from the American people. They won't get there by hunting for heretics or condescending to those with differing or more traditional values.

The hold that cultural orthodoxy of the left has on the Democratic Party may be so strong, they may not get there at all.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.